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The Meditation Initiative A Journey to Awareness and Simple Living

by Ken Small

San Diego - June 2, 2009 - It's 7 a.m. and Jeff Zlotnik is holding meditation with a group of 300 students taking their exit exam at an inner city public high school in San Diego, CA. "Follow your breath," he gently instructs. "When anxiety comes, breathe and let it go. With this awareness, you will find less anger and more peace." The students and teachers are attentive and silent. There is a calm and peaceful feeling in the room.

By 8:30 a.m., Jeff is off to a sober living home in La Jolla, where the sleepy-eyed residents are given a meditation to wake up on their comfortable couches.

"Now is all that exists," Jeff explains. "It is in the moment that your life takes place! Breathe with awareness and your stress is released." Their sleepy eyes are now more alert and some participants nod with approval. The session ends and after hugs, Jeff heads off to a senior center.

This program of socially engaged meditation outreach began six years ago. Jeff recounts his journey: "In 2003, I began taking meditation into prisons. This evolved to our first school at King-Chavez Academy. I realized there needed to be a bridge for westerners to engage the core of meditation practice without the cultural coverings, which so many found alienating."

The Meditation Initiative (TMI) is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization based in San Diego, CA, which takes meditation to public schools (K-12), colleges, prisons, hospitals, cancer clinics, senior centers, sober living homes, Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, and victims of domestic violence and human trafficking. TMI has a very simple and direct mission to "provide free meditation classes, training and community service outreach for children, adults and seniors to help prevent stress and anxiety, improve focus and attention, and share tools for anger management while improving overall mental and emotional health and wellbeing."

Jeff continues on his day, now at the Jewish Family Services senior center. The group of elders is very attentive to their meditation experience. Jeff guides the meditation along gently, knowing it may be challenging to still 70 to 90 years of mental accumulation. After the session, a very alert, spry octogenarian approaches him and says, "Young man, do you know what Auschwitz was?" "Yes," Jeff replies. She adds, "I was there. Can you imagine what it is like to lose an entire family in the Holocaust?" Jeff responds, "No, I can't imagine." The woman then asks: "Will this make the pain better?" Jeff answers honestly: "Though it will not go away, it will make the pain better."

Meanwhile, across town, Derek, another volunteer for TMI, begins the weekly meditation at the downtown San Diego city prison. Working with the inmates to find deeper understanding to control their intense frustrations and emotions is challenging. Derek guides the small group back to the awareness of the present moment through the breath to release their fear, anger and anxiety. He plants seeds to bring transformation as these incarcerated men later reenter society.

The Meditation Initiative is a 501(c)(3) Charitable Non-Profit Organization

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While Derek is at the prison, Jeff heads into the KPBS offices to meet for a staff lunchbreak meditation—a much needed 30 minutes of stress-free breathing and relaxation. Valerie Breen, marketing coordinator for KPBS comments, “Meditation with Jeff is like a breath of fresh air. With Meditation Mondays at KPBS, we know the rest of our week will be more focused and less stressful.”

It’s now evening at the University of California, San Diego. Some people arrive with cushions for the student meditation group. There is no organization, just word of mouth, text messages and Facebook, yet students, both new and experienced in meditation, continue to come. Tony, a UCSD student, writes about his meditation experience: “You must recognize that sitting is a discipline. It is a form of protests against everything that says time is money and nothing else; it is rebellion against life in need of constant superficial stimulation. And here is the hard part: breathing. Our current zeitgeist of speed and instantaneousness is hard to break apart. Your attention to the breath can begin to ward off these distractions, but it takes practice. Our environment wages guerilla warfare and you must learn to breathe with the beast. As you sit, you hear a creak in the rafters. What was that? A distraction? No, but your thought was a distraction. Always turn your attention back to the breath and you will begin to more peacefully experience life’s changing environment between breaths, and more importantly in your day-to-day life. Some may call this meditation, some may call it doing nothing, but I call it simply sitting and those who dare to sit are peaceful people.”

TMI’s project complementing its inner city work will include a Rural Retreat Meditation Center in San Diego County for which it is seeking land. Meditation, the principles of simple living, ecological mindfulness and organic gardening will form its basis.

TMI’s life-changing benefits from simple meditation practice are summed up by a 14-year-old student named José: “I like meditation because it is peaceful and the only quiet time I have. It has helped me work on my anger problems. I have been having problems with my Mom because I just can’t control myself. Now I have a joyful time with my Mom; we talk, laugh, go places, and we can be with each other without fighting.”

The Meditation Initiative outreach programs and services are provided for free and rely on donations from the community. Visit www.meditationinitiative.org or e-mail peace@meditationinitiative.org for more information.

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